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ABSTRACT

This study examined North Carolina schools serving large numbers of poor and minority students, emphasizing nine schools where black student achievement was especially high, where black students had made strong gains, or where the black-white achievement gap was closing faster than the state average. Between 1999-00, research teams visited each school, interviewing staff, administrators, students, and parents, observing in classrooms, reviewing documents, and interviewing district-level staff. Overall, teachers in these schools often mentioned characteristics of school leadership as a catalyst for their success. There was tolerance for different teaching styles. Administrators treated teachers like colleagues. Each school emphasized helping students master basic reading, writing, and mathematics competencies; using district-wide pacing guides and teacher-developed thematic units; using elective teachers; and promoting professional development. Most schools participated in district-wide reading and mathematics testing every 6-9 weeks. Many schools used technology in teaching core academic skills. Other common strategies included one-on-one tutoring, small group programs, and creative grouping. Many of the schools had developed a culture of achievement and utilized various mechanisms for communicating high expectations to teachers, students, and parents. An appendix profiles case study schools. (Contains 23 references.) (SM)

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ED 459 302

Closing the Achievement Gap:

Views from Nine Schools

July 2000

Public Schools of North Carolina
State Board of Education/Department of Public Instruction
Office of Instructional and Accountability Services
Division of Accountability Services/Evaluation Section

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INTRODUCTION

The achievement of minority students represents a long-standing issue in the field of education. Across the U.S., white students and students from wealthy, well-educated families have consistently outperformed students from most other ethnic backgrounds and students from impoverished families on virtually every indicator of academic achievement in the host of studies that have addressed this issue. The term "achievement gap" is often used to refer to this phenomenon. In order to better understand how to promote academic achievement of minority students, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) began a study of schools across the state who serve large numbers of minority students and students in poverty. This study focused specifically on such schools where Black student achievement is exceptionally high, where Black students have made strong gains, or where the achievement gap between white and Black students is closing faster than the state average.

METHODS

A preliminary analysis of data from the North Carolina statewide testing program between 1994 and 1999 identified several schools where 1) sizable numbers of minority students and students in poverty were enrolled and 2) where minority students were achieving at high levels on various measures. Between the Spring of 1999 and the Spring of 2000, teams consisting of NCDPI staff, local school district staff, and/or university faculty made one-day visits to nine of these schools (see Appendix A for a brief profile of each of these schools). Interviews were conducted with staff, administrators, students, and parents. Team members also observed in classrooms, interviewed district-level staff, and reviewed school documents to help identify instructional strategies, programs, and other factors that might be contributing to the schools' academic success. After examining the data collected from these visits, summaries of the observations of team members were sent back to the schools in order to verify their accuracy.

Subsequent analysis of the data included looking for similarities and differences across schools in terms of the types of programs, practices and other factors that were present. Through this process, several common themes were identified as potential contributors to the high levels of achievement demonstrated by minority students in these schools.

RESULTS

Leadership

Teachers in these schools often mentioned characteristics of the school leadership as a potential catalyst for their recent success. In these schools, administrators treat teachers like colleagues and allow them the freedom to use their preferred teaching strategies, provided they are covering the curriculum and their students are demonstrating progress. There is tolerance for different teaching styles in different classrooms as long as all students are achieving. Administrators in these schools were also lauded by teachers for ensuring that all of the training, materials, and resources needed to teach students effectively were made available.

Focused Instruction

Each of the schools visited was very focused on helping students master basic competencies in reading, writing, and mathematics. The use of *district-wide pacing guides* in these subject areas, helping teachers maintain adequate coverage of the state curriculum across the year, was very common. This focus on coverage of the curriculum was often supported by requiring teachers to turn in lesson plans to the administrators, who documented the specific curriculum objectives addressed and instructional strategies used.

The use of *teacher-developed thematic units* that incorporate multiple subject areas (e.g., reading and social studies, math and science) was also common. In some cases, teachers were

paid extra money to develop these units during the summer. Once developed, these lesson plans were then made available to all teachers in the school and across the district.

Focused instruction in these schools was further evidenced by the *inclusion of elective teachers* (e.g., music, PE, art, foreign languages) in all of the school's programs and strategies. In many cases, all elective teachers were receiving the same professional development that the core subject teachers were getting. Elective teachers in many of these schools incorporate writing, reading, and mathematics activities into their daily lessons. Some schools also utilized elective teachers during school-wide acceleration/enrichment periods. During these periods, each teacher (regardless of her/his subject area) works with a small group of students on reading, writing, and mathematics skills.

Professional development opportunities, specifically in writing, were abundant in several of these schools. This training usually focused not only on how to teach the writing process, but also how to score writing samples according to the framework used in the statewide testing program. This has been done in a variety of ways. Some schools have used outside consultants. Others have designated one teacher to receive extensive training and then serve as the school's "writing specialist." This specialist then does workshops in-house for the other teachers in the school. Some schools have also held parent writing workshops where parents are taught how to teach their children to write and how to score their children's writing samples.

Periodic Assessment and Data Disaggregation

Most of the schools we visited participate in district-wide testing every six or nine weeks in reading and mathematics. Item banks and test generation software were used by schools to generate these tests, which are similar to the state's end-of-grade reading and mathematics assessments. In most cases, each test item is linked to a specific objective in the state's Standard

Course of Study. Some schools also administered and scored writing prompts at certain times throughout the year that were similar in form to the state's 4th and 7th grade writing assessments.

The results of these extra testing sessions are typically scored at the district office, with the results disseminated quickly to each principal and in turn to each teacher. The results are used by the schools to determine which curriculum objectives need more focus, and which students may need extra assistance in order to master the necessary material before the end of the year.

Most of the schools in this study disaggregate data intensely from these district-wide tests as well as from the state's end-of-grade tests, usually with the help of central office staff. Data on all of these tests are reported back to the school in very fine-grained analyses (e.g., by teacher, by student, by curriculum objective, as well as overall results for gender/ethnic groups and grade levels). For example, one school in the study has an early-morning remediation session every day where each teacher works with a small group of students on reading and math skills. This school coded their 6-week tests so that data could be analyzed separately for each of these small remediation groups. The school used this information to see which teachers were most effective during these sessions.

Targeted Use of Technology

Many schools reported using *technology resources* school-wide to teach core academic skills, and some used these resources specifically to help students who were struggling academically. Some examples of targeted strategies included reserving extra lab time (before, during, or after school) for lower-achieving students, or scheduling computer lab time only for lower-achieving students during the second semester of the school year. With respect to school-wide strategies, a number of schools were using the STAR testing program, which is part of the

Accelerated Reader curriculum package. This program allows teachers to monitor students' reading levels as they read leveled books and take comprehension tests, with the results of those tests being fed back to teachers on a regular basis. Like the STAR program, many of the other software programs used in these schools were also designed so that all students could work at their specific ability level using the same software package.

One-on-One Tutoring

One-on-one tutoring was another common strategy used in these schools with students who are behind academically. These tutoring sessions were usually scheduled during elective courses or after the regular school day. A variety of personnel were used to staff these tutoring sessions, including volunteer parents, volunteer retired community members, or regular school teachers. Some schools even bused students to a local church or other community site for supervised after-school homework sessions. One school reported that each teacher "adopts" one lower-achieving student each year and spends time each week working with that student either after school or during her/his daily planning time.

Small Group Programs

In addition to one-on-one assistance, several schools in the study also used various small-group arrangements with lower-achieving students (i.e., Level I, II and lower Level III students). In some cases, these students were attending small-group acceleration sessions focusing on reading and mathematics skills while other students went to electives (PE, art, music, foreign languages, etc.). Some schools have hired full or part-time teachers specifically to teach these acceleration sessions.

Other schools has designated a school-wide class period for reading/math/writing instruction each day. During this period, lower-achieving students engage in acceleration activities in reading and mathematics, while higher-achieving students participate in enrichment activities. In some cases these students are "regrouped" later in the year based on the results of 6-week or 9-week testing. These class periods were usually scheduled as the first period of the day (e.g., 8:00 to 8:40 a.m.), with group sizes kept small by including all teachers regardless of what subject they normally taught.

Grouping Strategies

In addition to grouping students for acceleration sessions, some schools also grouped students within each grade level at the beginning of the school year based on previous year's end-of-grade test results. For example, one school was reducing class size for lower-achieving students by grouping students homogeneously so that lower-achieving students would take classes together in smaller groups throughout the day (approx. 15 students per class) and higher-achieving students would take their classes together in larger groups (approx. 25 students per class). One school also had two computer labs, with one devoted to practice in basic skills for lower-achieving students and the other devoted to enrichment activities for higher-achieving students. In this school, students were assigned to one computer lab or the other based on their end-of-grade test results from the previous year. However, in at least one school that was grouping students for instruction, observers noted less rigorous and less innovative instructional goals in classes serving primarily lower-achieving students.

Culture of Achievement

Most of the schools visited in this study had various mechanisms for communicating high expectations to teachers, students and parents, and had reportedly developed what might be deemed a "culture of achievement." Principals set high goals for the school and the teachers, and these expectations appeared to filter through to students and parents. Through a district-level policy, some of the schools had "accountability agreements" that had to be signed by students, parents and teachers each year, along with mastery-based promotion standards at each grade level, beginning with kindergarten. Some schools had established high passing rates for classes (e.g., students must have 80% average to pass each class). Some individual teachers reported that students had to re-do all unacceptable work until they mastered the material. Most schools also had parent handbooks that explicitly laid out the goals of the school and the expectations for both students and parents in helping to achieve those goals.

Many schools also had stable, experienced staffs who clearly work well together. Teachers in these schools were honestly committed to ensuring that all students succeed, and would stay late after school and even come in on weekends to help students, to plan lessons, or do other things that were focused on helping students succeed. The groups of teachers in these schools truly seemed to be "on-board" with the school's plan for raising student performance. Common planning time for teachers, either by grade level or subject area, was reported to be very helpful in this respect.

Most of the schools in the study also went to great lengths to celebrate achievement and to highlight the accomplishments of students. Many schools reported having pep rallies or picnics honoring high-achieving students (although at least one school limited its academic pep rally focus to end-of-grade performance). Some schools reported providing material rewards, ranging from books to trophies to bicycles, for students who performed at high levels

academically. Rewards in these schools were not necessarily limited to just the high-achieving students, however. Some schools were implementing the Renaissance program, which rewards students with material goods for attendance, good behavior, and individual academic growth. In addition, bulletin boards around many of the schools highlighted the names of students who had made significant strides in academics and behavior. For example, these boards often highlighted students who had read large numbers of books in the Accelerated Reader program, or who had been nominated by their teachers for making turnarounds in behavior and attendance.

CONCLUSIONS

Although there were some important similarities across the nine schools visited in this study, there was also some variation with respect to the strategies employed to raise student achievement. Differences among the types of programs utilized, as well as how those programs were implemented, imply that what might be effective in one school may not be effective or even desirable in all schools. In addition, none of the schools could point to a single strategy or program that they thought was responsible for their success with poor and minority students. In most cases, success was attributed to the cumulative effects of several factors. As one principal stated, "there is no magic bullet" that will single-handedly eliminate the achievement gap. Clearly there need to be efforts on several fronts simultaneously to foster high achievement for all students.

Despite the study's focus on strategies that raise minority student achievement, it is important to note that none of the schools in the study reported that their programs were designed for minority students. It is worth noting that some of the strategies employed in these schools do *not* target any specific student group; that is, they are school-wide strategies aimed at raising achievement among all students regardless of their current level of performance or their

demographic characteristics. In addition, most of the targeted strategies used in these schools were focused primarily on students who are struggling academically (i.e., Level I, II and lower Level III students), not on minority students per se.

A study such as this provides important descriptive information about what is happening in schools that are experiencing high levels of achievement among poor and/or minority students. However, the fact that these schools are employing particular strategies for raising achievement does not mean that those strategies are necessarily responsible for their success. For example, schools that are not making similar progress might very well be engaging in some of these same activities. In addition, some of the strategies employed in these schools may not be entirely consistent with research and contemporary educational practice. Therefore the analysis here should not be taken as a blanket endorsement of these strategies; it is merely a description of what is happening instructionally in a sample of schools that are helping to close the achievement gap in North Carolina.

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APPENDIX A

BRIEF PROFILE OF CASE STUDY SCHOOLS

Gaston Middle School

LEA: Northampton County

City: Gaston, NC

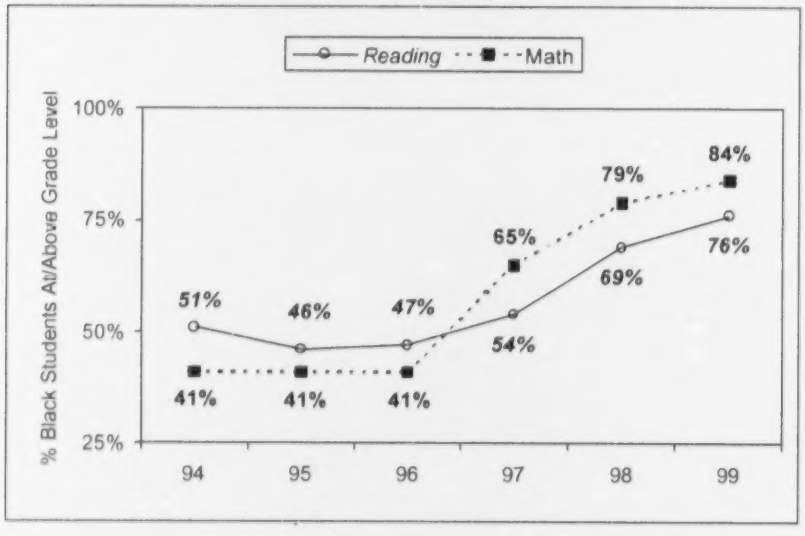
Student Ethnicity (1999-2000): 93% Black; 6% White

Grade Levels Served: 6-8

Enrollment (1999-2000): 361

Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch (1998-99): 83%

Percent of Black Students Proficient in Reading and Mathematics at Gaston Middle:



Garysburg Elementary School

LEA: Northampton County

City: Garysburg, NC

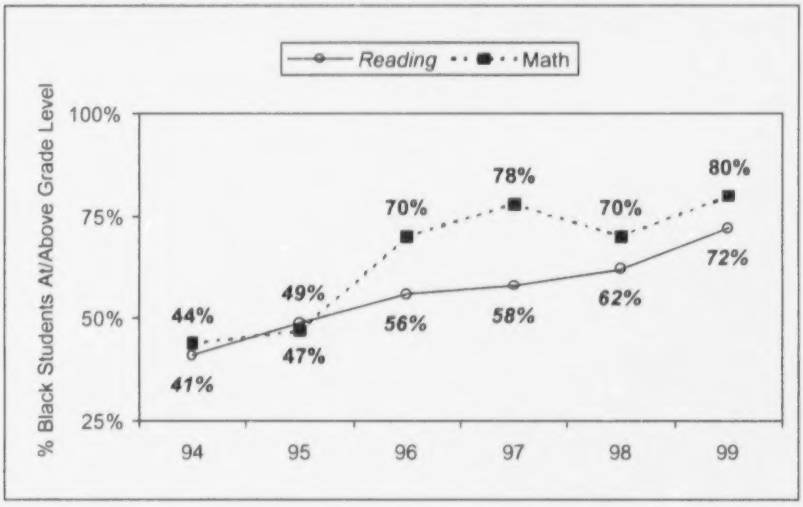
Student Ethnicity (1999-2000): 98% Black; 2% Other

Grade Levels Served: K-5

Enrollment (1999-2000): 290

Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch (1998-99): 87%

Percent of Black Students Proficient in Reading and Mathematics at Garysburg Elementary:



J. W. Coon Elementary School

LEA: Cumberland County

City: Fayetteville, NC

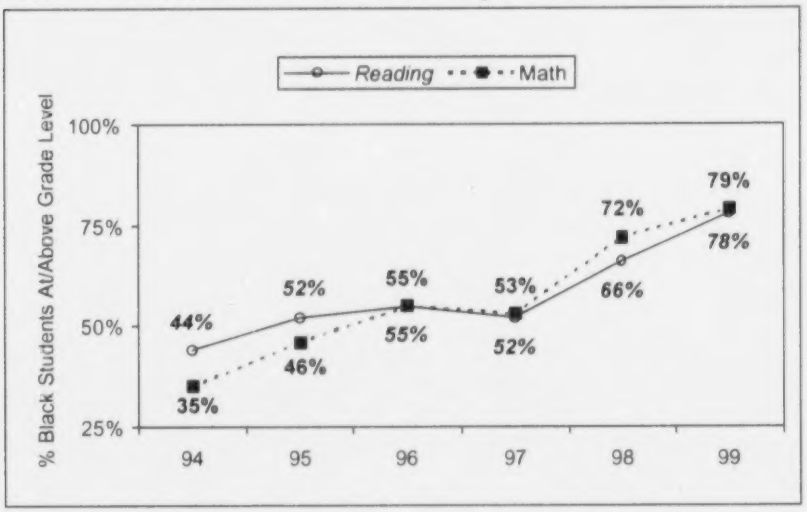
Student Ethnicity (1999-2000): 55% White; 39% Black; 6% Other

Grade Levels Served: K-5

Enrollment (1999-2000): 290

Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch (1998-99): 72%

Percent of Black Students Proficient in Reading and Mathematics at Coon Elementary:



Anne Chesnutt Middle School

LEA: Cumberland County

City: Fayetteville, NC

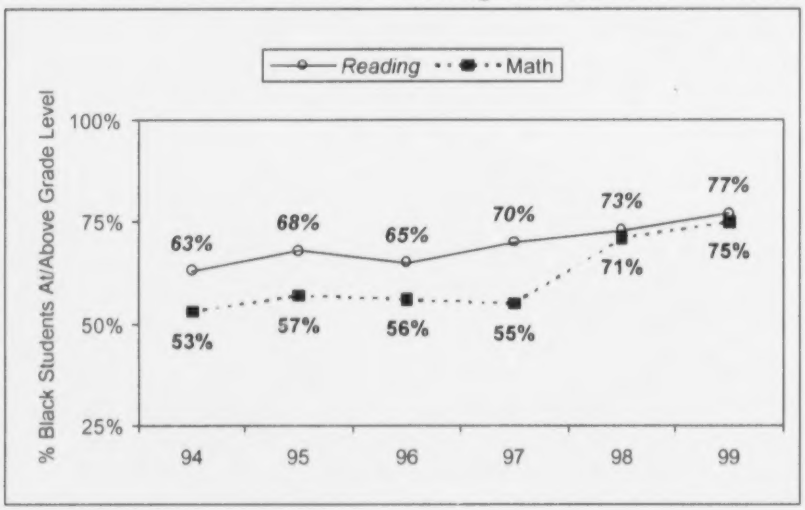
Student Ethnicity (1999-2000): 64% Black; 24% White; 12% Other

Grade Levels Served: 6-8

Enrollment (1999-2000): 881

Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch (1998-99): 45%

Percent of Black Students Proficient in Reading and Mathematics at Chesnutt Middle:



Winstead Elementary School

LEA: Wilson County

City: Wilson, NC

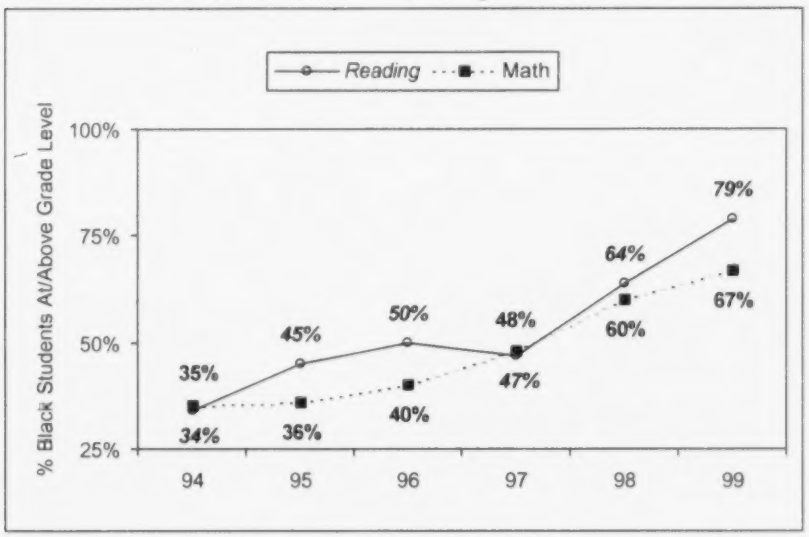
Student Ethnicity (1999-2000): 85% Black; 9% Hispanic; 6% Other

Grade Levels Served: K-5

Enrollment (1999-2000): 478

Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch (1998-99): 98%

Percent of Black Students Proficient in Reading and Mathematics at Winstead Elementary:



Springfield Middle School

LEA: Wilson County

City: Lucama, NC

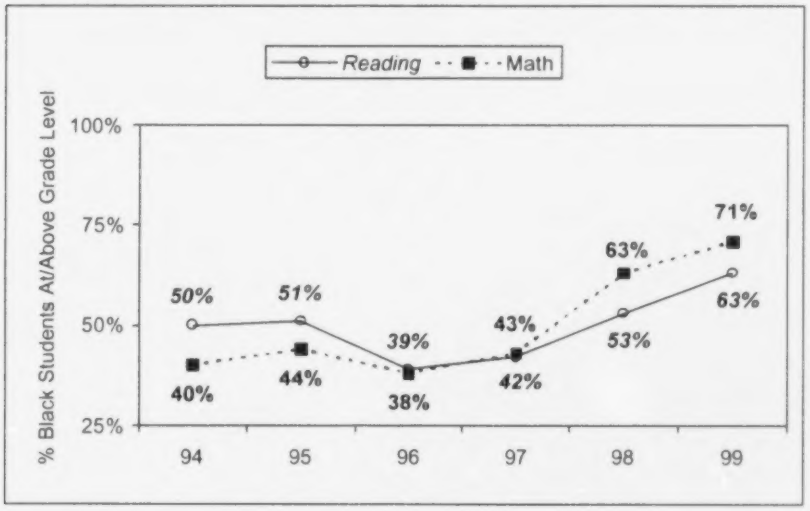
Student Ethnicity (1999-2000): 59% White; 33% Black; 8% Other

Grade Levels Served: 6-8

Enrollment (1999-2000): 426

Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch (1998-99): 45%

Percent of Black Students Proficient in Reading and Mathematics at Springfield Middle:



Highland Elementary School

LEA: Mecklenburg County

City: Charlotte, NC

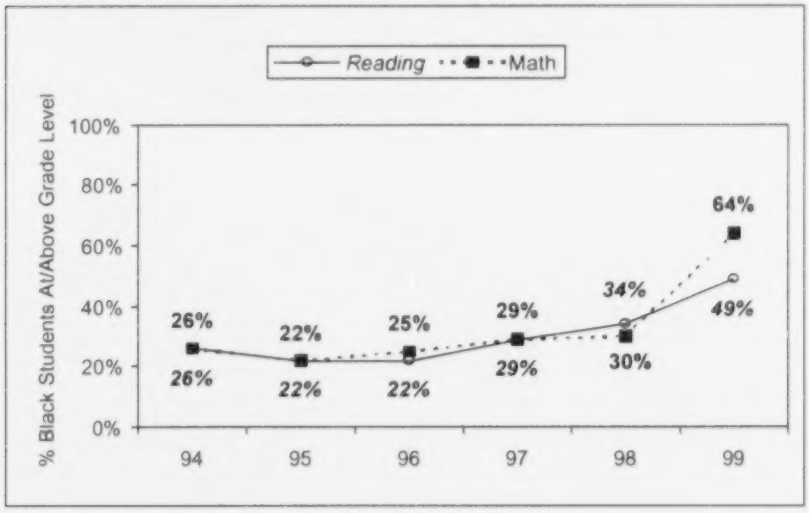
Student Ethnicity (1999-2000): 80% Black; 10% White; 10% Other

Grade Levels Served: K-5

Enrollment (1999-2000): 305

Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch (1998-99): 94%

Percent of Black Students Proficient in Reading and Mathematics at Highland Elementary:



Albert H. Bangert Elementary School

LEA: Craven County

City: New Bern, NC

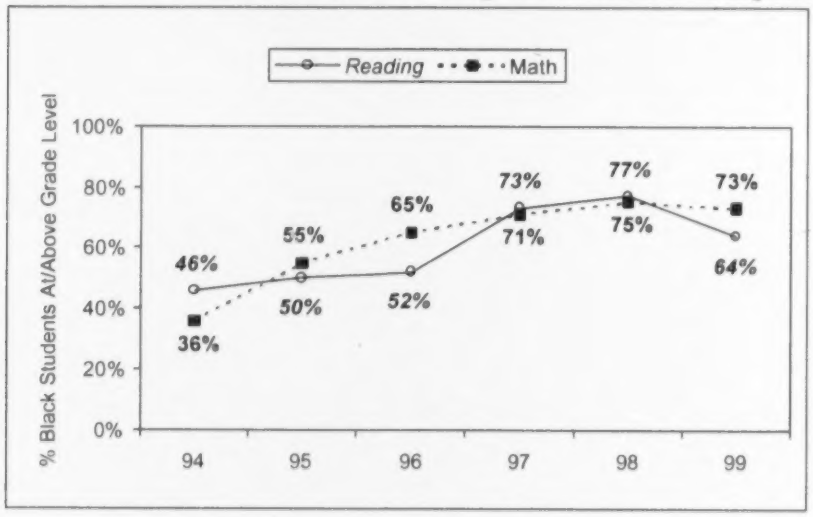
Student Ethnicity (1999-2000): 53% White; 46% Black

Grade Levels Served: K-5

Enrollment (1999-2000): 426

Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch (1998-99): 46%

Percent of Black Students Proficient in Reading and Mathematics at Bangert Elementary:



Grover C. Fields Middle School

LEA: Craven County

City: New Bern, NC

Student Ethnicity (1999-2000): 50% White; 48% Black; 2% Other

Grade Levels Served: 6-8

Enrollment (1999-2000): 676

Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch (1998-99): 44%

Percent of Black Students Proficient in Reading and Mathematics at Fields Middle: